

“The Vast and Howling Wilderness”: Sounds of Early America

Panel chairs: Phillip James Grider (phillipjames.grider@uni-goettingen.de) and Abigail Fagan (abigail.fagan@engsem.uni-hannover.de)

According to authors like Mary Rowlandson, William Bradford, John Smith, and Cotton Mather, the soundscape of early America was replete with the howling of wind, the crashing of rain, and the snarling of wolves and the other inhabitants of the forests and swamps of a hostile colonial environment. While Rowlandson writes of a “howling wilderness,” for instance, Bradford reports of “hideous and great cries” in the night, Smith remembers the “hideous cry and howling of wolves,” and Mather repeatedly evokes the sound and image of snarling wolves and crying lambs in his tracts on witchcraft. In light of these myriad cries, this panel asks: What changes in our engagement with early American culture, history, and literature when we foreground sound?

This question is one that is as methodological as it is descriptive. Historians like Saidiya Hartman, Lisa Brooks, and Marisa Fuentes remind us that the historical archive is fundamentally flawed for the ways in which it privileges texts written by the economic elite. They and others seek to write of the subjects the archive represents largely through records of noise, rather than written text, as in the sounds of the pain of enslavement in 17th century Bridgetown, Barbados (Fuentes) and the orality of transnational and interspecies encounters on 17th century Wabanaki land (Brooks). Foregrounding sound—the colonial perception and ideological representation of sound; African and Indigenous voices, song, and sound that resisted colonial archival erasure; as well as the silences of those omitted from the colonial archive—allows for possible re-readings of early America. Oral history and story-telling, in particular, represent one such element of the Early American soundscape. We therefore welcome papers that grapple with methods for and the significance of including oral history and story-telling in academic inquiry about American history. Given the colonial nature of Western methods of keeping time (cf. Mark Rifkin, Dina Gilio-Whitaker, and Leanne Betosamosake Simpson), papers that address sonic modes of recording history beyond the early American period are welcome. We are also interested in all papers that explore the significance of sound to American culture and society up to 1830. Paper topics could include but are not limited to:

- The significance of sound, speech, and/or noise in early American texts
- The music, speech, and other sounds of early America
- Modes by which sound traveled among continents, such as Africa, Europe, and North America
- Sound and linguistic exchange, linguistic drift, and European linguistic hegemony in and beyond early settler America
- Sound as a means of navigating kinship with non-humans
- Modes by which descriptions of sound participate in processes of identity formation, including proclamations of belonging, difference, or othering
- Explicit vs. implicit sound
- Oral history and story-telling
- The limitations of approaches to early American cultural history that privilege written records
- Silence as a form of sound in absentia

Confirmed Speaker: Shelby Lynn Johnson (Oklahoma State University).

Paper Title: “Phillis Wheatley Peters’ Black Soundscapes and the Politics of New Materialism.”